

*WAITING FOR AN ANGEL: REFASHIONING THE AFRICAN WRITING  
SELF*

By  
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M.A., University of Kansas 2008

Submitted to the Department of English and the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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**Chapter One**

**Introduction**

Achebe begins two of his essays—“The Novelist as Teacher” (1965) and “The Writer and His Community” (1984)—with a critique of an individualistic conception of the creative mind, a conception he attributes to the European literary tradition. How, Achebe wonders, half tickled and half puzzled, would a writer desire to rebel against society and banish himself to the fringes of society? In “The Writer and His Community,” Achebe situates this literary attitude within the broader social and economic context of individualism and a will-to-ownership that owes its roots to the advent of the book and its copyright culture. In contrast, as an African writer coming from a culture of collective ownership of art-objects, he thinks of his literary creativity and positions himself in relation to society differently.

In “The Novelist as Teacher,” Achebe addresses what society expects of its writers, an aspect of the writer-society relationship he sees as largely unexplored. In the second essay, he explores, more specifically, the intersections of writer, writing, and society. His conclusion is that African societies do expect something of their writers and that the writer should always strive for an organic relationship between his artistic self, his artistic creation, and the collective. Other African writers, in the Nigerian setting, have articulated this conception of the African writer and his or her role in society differently. Wole Soyinka, writing in

the 60s and the 70s, constructs the image of the writer as social visionary. Femi Osofisan, writing in the 80s and 90s, thinks of the writer as the creative foundation of a viable national ethos. Despite the differences in the formulation of their arguments, these writers all agree that African literature functions as social and cultural resource, not as a means to individual authorial self-realization, and that African writers ought also to function as public intellectuals.

Third generation Nigerian writers are no different. Despite accusations that their writings lack social and political force because of what some critics see as disabling pessimism and uncritical adoption of post-modernist and post-structuralist stylistic modes, third generation writers are strongly driven by the assumption that writers have a social role with serious consequences for collective resistance against power. I would even go as far as arguing that third generation Nigerian writers articulate a more refined representation of the artist as a social entity and of writing as a collective process precisely because they do not take the social function of African writers and writings for granted. They do this by showing how the writer's social role is always being constructed and performed within powerful historical, material, and ideological forces and, most importantly, how these forces can be both restraining and productive. They are asking the same question that Achebe, Soyinka, and Osofisan asked: what is the role of the African writer? It is just that the new writers are proffering answers that are quite different from those of their forebears. Before addressing some of these issues using Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, I explore assumptions about the

creative imagination, history, language, and the literary intellectual that anchor some of the earlier conceptions of the writer, writing, and society that third generation writings are challenging.

Achebe's notions about the writer and society are embodied in his vision of the writer as teacher. Achebe sees the writer as a modern-day manifestation of the village storyteller who often ends his or her tales and fables with a lesson about social mores and cultural values. Literature teaches society about collective survival particularly in African societies that Achebe believes have become culturally enervated and fragmented by colonial social and political impositions. The writer, through writings that counter myths of racial inferiority and correct Africa's distorted histories, alleviates the "disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien races" (29). Embedded within such a social condition and faced with an urgent "task of re-education and regeneration" (Achebe 29), the African writer does not feel inclined to join the European writer in his search for authenticity. Authenticity is an artistic consciousness defined by Lionel Trilling as the artistic drive towards self-realization in which the creative self strives to be as autonomous and self-defining as the created object (Trilling 100). Authenticity is also grounded on a relationship of conflict between artist and society in which the artist perceives society as an oppressive totality. In contrast, African writers like to see themselves, Achebe argues, as bound up with their societies in ways that efface the individual creative self in a relationship of co-creativity with the collective. Achebe's humanist and moralist vision of the writer

as committed to a program of collective cultural reformation is appealing. What is less persuasive is Achebe's representation of the writer-as-teacher, a figure of authority, in a power-neutral relationship with the collective.

The image of the writer as teacher is not fortuitous. It establishes a particular notion about the social production of knowledge and projects the writer and the community in specific ways. For one thing, the image of the writer as teacher functions in relation to the construction of society as students: less knowledgeable human beings who have guilelessly accepted their racial inferiority and need to be enlightened on forgotten truths about past histories for cultural retrieval to take place. Another important feature of the teacher-image at work here is that the writer does not have to share the social and cultural condition of the collective, for the teacher's authority is contingent on the assumption that the teacher does not share the student's ignorance. How, then, does the African writer come to possess a body of cultural knowledge supposedly free of colonial ideology? As Achebe notes, "the writer and his society live in the same place" (27), within material conditions determined by colonial rule. In addition to this, the writer is trained within the cultural institutions of colonialism and is attached to an economic class organically bound to the economic institutions of colonialism. As a result, to attribute re-generative and reformative knowledge of cultural and racial retrieval to writers who are themselves as embedded within the social world of colonialism as their societies is to elide the reality of ideological and material restraints that construct the writer, cultural

resources such as language and history, and the society. It is not that the writer, using literature, cannot engender cultural transformation but that Achebe's representation of the writer's role in the cultural transformation process takes too much for granted.

For example, as teacher, the writer does not have to account for his or her intellectual status and Achebe is not compelled to engage the contradictions and discontinuities that attend the writer's intellectual becoming. Seen in this light, Achebe's teacher fits the profile of Gramsci's traditional intellectual. Traditional intellectuals are intellectuals who ground their social status on the "uninterrupted historical continuity" of their function (1139). As teacher, the writer is granted a social status because she is filling a public office that has always existed and that is fixed part of society. In placing the writer within a lineage of public educators—the storyteller, the teacher—Achebe somewhat naturalizes the writer's social function and projects the writer's intellectual status as "autonomous and independent of the dominant social group," which in Achebe's case is colonialism (1139). Another way to put this is to say that, as teacher, writers have an intellectual history that is before and, therefore, outside of colonialism, hence their ability to create cultural and social meanings independently of colonial ideology. As Gramsci notes, "this self-assessment is not without consequences in the ideological and political field, consequences of wide-ranging import" (1139). In other words, cultural representations that conceal the historical and material *situatedness* of the intellectual can be implicated in "the maintenance and

reproduction of social power” (Eagleton 13). Before addressing the social and political consequences of such an artistic orientation, I wish to use Soyinka’s social visionary to further the claims I am making about artistic representations that are driven by a social ethos but grounded by conceptions of the artist as autonomous, independent, and transcendent.

Soyinka’s construct of the African writer is represented in the image of the social visionary. The aim of the social visionary is to break society from its social, cultural, and ideological habits of mind. The literature of the social vision is, therefore, “a literature of prognostic enquiry” that seeks to disrupt conventional knowledge about history and society (100). The social vision can be defined as:

A creative concern which conceptualizes or extends actuality beyond the purely narrative, making it reveal realities beyond the immediately attainable, a concern which upsets orthodox acceptances in an effort to free society of historical or other superstitions, these are qualities possessed by literature of social vision. (66)

The social vision is based on the notion that social, cultural, and historical objects of knowledge can become calcified into traditions and superstitions, thereby impeding social renewal or what Soyinka calls “visionary projection of society.” Ousmane Sembene’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Two Thousand Seasons*, and Yambo Oulougem’s *Bound to Violence* are prominent among Soyinka’s literature of the social vision. What these works share in common, though to varying degrees, is their radical interrogation of accepted forms of history.



Soyinka develops his argument about the social vision within representations of history. He argues that a novel has a social vision when it fulfils “one of the social functions of literature: the visionary reconstruction of the past for the purposes of a social direction” (106). This form of literary engagement of history echoes some of the principles that govern Achebe’s conceptions of the writer as teacher: the need “to look back and try and find out where we went wrong and where the rain began to beat us” and to teach the society “that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery” (Achebe 30). One difference, though, is that Achebe’s conception of the writer as teacher is based on a sense of identification between writer and society that Soyinka rules out in his conception of the writer as social visionary. Soyinka also makes a distinction between “evocations of actuality” and “evocations of a social vision” (87). Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Soyinka would say, is a book that evokes the actuality of African history, that aspires to respond to colonial exemption of Africa from history by saying, “look, Africa does have an active and complex history.” “The writer,” Soyinka notes, “does little more than stretch that history into tangible and affective reality at what ever point of history he chooses to bring alive” (87). The value of this literary approach to history lies in its educative value. Its shortcoming is that, left unchecked, it soon begins to create its own myths, orthodoxies, and conventional conceptions of history. This is what moves Soyinka to lament a loss of vision among African writers in the controversial lecture of 1967 titled “Writers in a Modern African

State.” In this lecture, Soyinka worries that the African literary space has become clogged with uncritical restatements of what has become conventional literary ideals about African history. The writer is “content to turn his eye backward in time and prospect in archaic fields for forgotten gems which would dazzle and distract the present” at a time when thieving and despotic rulers are holding his societies hostage (17). In other words, writers are satisfied with the “position of chronicler and postmortem surgeon” instead of being the “voice of vision” for society (20).

The social visionary is essentially the writer who can break free from the norm, from convention, be it colonial or nationalist, and open up new horizons of thought. The writer as social visionary “contests and replaces” accepted ways of thinking about culture, history and society (Soyinka 66). What is significant about the social vision and its iconoclastic sensibility is that it allows the possibility of conflict between writer and society. Soyinka is open about the individual prominence of the author in the creation of a social vision and the potential for conflict that this creates. He remarks that even though literature, especially within African settings, is considered a “social activity,” it is “individual in its expression and its choice of area of concern” (67). It is in arguments such as these that I see Soyinka’s representation of the writer and his relationship with society as a step away from Achebe’s presumption of a relationship of identification. Nonetheless, the assumptions about individual subjectivity at work in Soyinka’s concept of the writer as social visionary have far-reaching ideological implications.

It is rather ironic that the social visionary engages history by transcending it. What I find most fascinating about the social vision is that, on the surface, it seems refreshingly historical. The sense of history as highly unstable and of culture as necessarily active and constantly in motion evokes Fanonian concepts of culture. The social visionary is moved by the desire to move beyond the simplicity of traditions, the “mummified fragments” of conventional values, and the “translucidity of customs” (Fanon 224). In this regard, the social vision appears to be a radical engagement with history. In reality, though, the social vision is grounded on concepts of the individual subject that establishes it as a flight from history.

Soyinka’s social visionary has striking resemblances with the mythopoeist, a type of creative consciousness, which came under heavy criticism during Soyinka’s debate with the African Marxists. One defining feature of the mythopoeist is the interest in perennial and transcendental essences of human existence such as death and the cycle of rebirth. Such timeless phenomena, Soyinka argues, nullify “History, progress, and material certitude.” History, then, merely keeps a quasi-sociological index of devices humans have created to come to terms with the finality of Death and these devices may even embody class conflicts and identities, but the mythopoeist is not interested in these secondary appropriations, which he sees as futile attempts to repress Death under historical and material particularities (127). This notion of Death as being beyond the reach of discourse or ideology presupposes a particular kind of creative mind or

authorial subject. Since Death, or other perennials have to be rid of historical and material “impurities” to be productive for the mythopoet in fashioning a social vision, it is necessary that the “truly creative writer” is one “who is properly uninhibited by ideological winds” and “*chooses*” to mobilize history in ways that “eschews distractions from the mythopoeic intent” but preserves “its innate intellectual muscularity” (126 italics not mine). It is a similar conception of the creative subject that is at work in one of Soyinka’s definitions of the social vision:

The intellectual and imaginative impulse to a re-examination of the positions on which man, nature and society are posited or interpreted at any point in history; the effort to expand such propositions, or to *contest and replace them with others more in tune with the writer’s own idealistic disposition or his pragmatic, resolving genius*; this impulse and its integrative role in the reordering of experience and events lead to a social vision (Italics mine 66).

Much more than Achebe’s teacher, the intellectual life of the social visionary is placed outside historical and material realities. Resources for the social visionary’s contestation and replacement of cultural myths and conventions arise from the “idealistic disposition” or “resolving genius” of the writer. One of the key problems with the concept of the solitary genius who can animate discourse and open up new horizons of knowledge independently of material and historical forces is that it ignores the ways in which social life is fundamentally collective.<sup>1</sup> Such a view of the subject inadvertently conceals the ways in which power operates in the social construction of knowledge and identity. To suggest

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<sup>1</sup> From an excerpt by Edward Said in *Ways of Reading*.

that knowledge can be constructed outside of material social/economic/political conditions, outside of language as a construct of these conditions, outside of history, and outside of ideology is to position the individual creative imagination that construct such knowledge as sovereign, autonomous and transcendental. Such a writing subject sees history, for example, as a resource at the disposal of the creative imagination not as a force that constructs it. In fact, for Soyinka, “history is irrevocably incomplete” and, therefore, needs to be reconstructed or transcended for the “creative originator” to create new horizons of social and cultural knowledge and release the regenerative energy needed for the survival and propagation of the community (126).

The underlying assumptions about the subject that underwrite Soyinka’s representation of the writer as social visionary calls to mind Foucault’s criticism of the notion of the founding and unitary subject and its elision of discourse. In “The Order of Discourse,” Foucault writes:

The founding subject, indeed, is given the task of directly animating the empty forms of language with his aims; it is he who in moving through the density and inertia of empty things grasps by intuition the meaning lying deposited within them; it is likewise the founding subject who finds horizons of meaning beyond time which history will henceforth only have to elucidate...In his relation to meaning, the founding subject has at his disposal signs, marks, traces, letters. But he does not need to pass via the singular instance of discourse in order to manifest them. (65).

The founding subject is transcendental because it defies the reality of discourse, the “conceptual terrain in which knowledge is formed and produced” and

legitimized (Young 48) and the ways in which discourse and its conceptual tools such as language are determined by powerful forces of history, regardless of a writer's "mythopoeic intent," "innate intellectual muscularity," "idealistic disposition" or "resolving genius."

These conceptions of the artistic subject have implications for the social orientation of the writer. For one thing, whether as a teacher who wields power that emanates from a public office entrenched by tradition or as a social visionary who creates knowledge from intuition, the office of the literary intellectual is one that only very few in society can fill. Apart from this exclusivist sensibility, the literary intellectual does not owe its intellectual status to the people's consent (Said 4-5). Note, though, how this bracketing off of the people is based on a prior construction of "the people" as powerless. Representing the writer as teacher means that even before analysis the society is constructed homogeneously as unenlightened, as needing to be taught, as errant, misguided, wrong-headed, etc. The social visionary, as an iconoclast, is also counterposed against a society that is conservative and socially non-conscious. These constructions of the community as broadly unenlightened help entrench the idea of the individual, independent, and autonomous writer. Achebe and Soyinka give the writer a social identity defined by power. Granted, it is important that the writer have social power, especially, within the context of resistance. What is problematic is the grossly uneven distribution of power between the writer and the people and how particular representations of the writer and the community naturalize and conceal

this power differential. Such artistic representations also run the risk of making the artist's "voice of social vision" a monologue (20).

Achebe, particularly, wants to think of art as a bridge, a conversation, something that facilitates the lines of communication between the writer and society, especially, when they need to band together against a common oppressor. In "Africa and Her Writers," Achebe writes, "there is no rigid barrier between makers of culture and its consumers. Art belongs to all, and is a 'function' of society" (22). It appears that, for Achebe, the artistic realm is a conceptual terrain where the fragmented and conflicting entities that constitute society cease to exist and co-join in an organic unity. To demonstrate how the creative subject facilitates such a collective consciousness, Achebe invokes the artistic values of the Mbari cult.

Mbari artists are sculptors, carvers, and painters designated by the community to create a shrine filled with images that represent diverse aspects of the people's lives and aspirations in reenactment of the "miracle of creation" (33). What is unique about these artists is their insistence on the anonymity of their works and refusal to any attribution of ownership out of a profound realization that art is a gift bestowed by a transcendent force. Unlike the European artistic subject that seeks to protect its individuality from external social power embodied in the collective, the Mbari artistic consciousness seeks to abnegate its artistic singularity for the animation of collective creativity. The African writer does not see herself as separate from the community or her creative will as individual.

Creativity, for the artist, is never individual but collective, though not as a construct of history and material environment, but as an endowment from a transcendental Creative Will.

That Achebe might not be thinking of the collective in its historical or material sense is evident in the fact that the artist's boundedness to society is conflict-free. Achebe presents a harmonious relationship between art, artist, and society that seems like "yet another Romantic exponent of the 'organic society'" (Eagleton 55). The questions Achebe is not asking are: what does the artist gain in losing his individuality? How does the anonymity of the artist disindividualize artistic power, disembody its authority, thereby making its power more productive?<sup>2</sup> What Achebe appears to ignore is the possibility that the humble self-abnegation of the artistic subject might well be a transposition of the individualistic and authoritarian tendencies of the creative consciousness to what Foucault calls "a transcendental anonymity" (1625), that which eludes criticism or interrogation because it is unidentifiable. What I am getting at here is that the form of artistic world Achebe represents in the Mbari artist, a world where art is social but indifferent to social difference, is idealist. In reality, societies are cultural spaces where different identities, interests, histories, and groups contest for material and cultural resources. Many of these differences are enacted through cultural representations, constructions of history, and language. It is important to note, though, that Achebe was writing at a much different time in Nigerian

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<sup>2</sup> I am thinking of Foucault's Panopticism where anonymity makes power more productive.



history, a time when colonialism was the major source of social power. Since the differences that define society are often determined, in part, by the directionality of power, prevailing material conditions, and by history, it is possible to see how Achebe may smooth over certain kinds of discontinuities in his society in a bid to resist colonial, foreign power as an oppressive totality.

Nonetheless, there are moments in “The Novelist as Teacher” when one can almost catch a glance at the chaotic social world that lies beneath the conflict-free artistic world Achebe presents. Achebe writes:

[Anti-colonial cultural revolution] is essentially a question of education...Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. (30).

When I read this, I want to ask, what society is he referring to? Achebe’s fellow literary socialites, the “benighted heathens” who still fetch water in clay pots (which most likely means that they have not had access to formal education, the social currency for upward mobility) (29); Achebe’s Christianized family who fetch water with biscuit-tins as a sign of their membership in an emergent social class; or the little schoolboy for whom “winter” instead of “harmattan” is tied to a particular social dream (29)?

Language is one of the social arenas within which social difference and conflict are performed. Gramsci, for instance, argues that “a historically determinate social group” has “a conception of the world implicit in its social practice” and “manifested in the language common to that group” (Brandist 62).

The discourse of a social group is often reflected in its language and modes of cultural expression, which is why language functions as a key site for social and cultural conflict (63). The Bakhtinian notion that language is saturated with ideology is also helpful in understanding how the culture of certain social groups comes to be defined as high or popular. Achebe is probably driven by such a realization in his criticism of the schoolboy. The story goes like this:

Three or four weeks ago my wife, who teaches English in a boys' school, asked a pupil why he wrote about winter when he meant the harmattan. He said the other boys would call him a bushman if he did such a thing! Now, you wouldn't have thought, would you, that there was something shameful in your weather? But apparently we do. How can this great *blasphemy* be purged? I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach that boy that here is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry (29-30).

Achebe has a deep awareness about the ways in which power-relations are manifested in language and culture. He might also be aware that since language is a "social product," and therefore, "not a sealed entity," the language of one social group will "reciprocally interfere with other languages and culture" in the same way that "winter" and "harmattan" interfere with one another (Brandist 63). The word "winter" is blasphemous because it represents the unitary and totalitarian tendencies of colonial power and claim to cultural superiority. It is not that "winter" is un-African while "harmattan" is. Achebe is less interested in "harmattan" as embodying an African essence than in the ways in which the

“differential relations” between “winter” and “harmattan” function discursively in the schoolboy’s rhetoric.

What Achebe does not seem to realize, however, is the way in which his language and that of the schoolboy are also in reciprocal interference. If Achebe does not acknowledge the fact that he and the boy come from two different “historically determinate” social groups, he may not see how power is also at work in his representation of the boy’s use of language. Achebe calls the boy’s use of “winter” to represent harmattan a blasphemy. Those are very strong words, indeed. One implication of such an indictment is that the boy’s blasphemy is counterposed against African literary language that is *unblasphemous*, exemplary, normative, correct, high, official, and possibly hegemonic. Little wonder that Achebe reasons, “I think it is part of my business as a writer to teach [the] boy that there is nothing disgraceful about the African weather, that the palm-tree is a fit subject for poetry” (30). However, could “teaching” be read as attempting to force all diverse and conflicting social accents into one voice, that of the literary intellectual (Brandist 70)?

A more subtle reading of the schoolboy incident is that it dramatizes communication problems that Eagleton says are “built into the communication structures of whole societies” (64). Certain key questions come to mind: what if what Achebe sees as blasphemy is actually an issue of communication? What else might the boy’s use of winter signify beyond what Achebe calls “the result of the disaster brought upon the African psyche in the period of subjection to alien

races” (29)? Might it be that, in using “winter” to describe the Nigerian weather, the boy is reaching out to the social and political dream attached to the word, a dream that is already a reality for Achebe, as one of the colonial-educated elites? This line of thought, however, does not fit Achebe’s conception of the artist as a broker of culture. For Achebe, in the conversation that art is, there is no failure of communication except in moments of crisis like colonial cultural and political imposition. The conflict between his language and that of the boy is attributed to the fact that the boy’s consciousness has been blighted by colonial cultural imposition not that Achebe and the boy inhabit social groups (even though constructed by the history of colonialism) with different level of access to social power.

The social dream embodied in the Mbari model is that art facilitates uninterrupted communion of creative will between individual artist and the community. It is on the basis of such an assumption that Achebe claims that his aspirations and that of his community are harmonious. Art facilitates communication between past, present, and future and between the artist and society. This conversation is, for Achebe, one that is time immemorial: from the village storyteller all the way down to the anti-colonial writer. This representation of the writer, writing, and society is convincing until we consider Eagleton’s remarks about hermeneutic notions of history:

The unending ‘dialogue’ of human history is as often as not a monologue by the powerful to the powerless, or...if it is indeed a ‘dialogue’ then the partners—men and women

[Achebe (high culture) and the boy (popular culture)], for example—hardly occupy equal positions. (64).

What Eagleton makes apparent here is that the power-relation of people involved in social and cultural ‘conversations’ have to be taken into account since it ceases to be a conversation when the voice of the more powerful interlocutor drowns out the rest.

Thus far, the aim of the foregoing analyses has been to explore ways in which the role of the African writer was articulated in the rhetoric of community and social embeddedness even though conceptions of artistic subjectivity at work were ones that established the writer’s autonomy from and transcendence of the social collective. The aim has also been to explore how this representation of the writer’s role operates ideologically by exhibiting values and forms of social relations that can be used in the “maintenance and reproduction of social power” (Eagleton 13). I also grounded a good number of these arguments on the claim that the writer, as much as his writing, creative resources, and the society he addresses, is constructed by specific historical, ideological, and material determinants. At least, this is the central assumption against which I try to make sense of representations of the artistic consciousness as autonomous and transcendental. The key question, then, is, given the pressures that ideology, history, and material conditions place on the writer, his access to particular forms of discourse, his sense of self, sense of community, and social orientation, what are some of the implications of concealing, ignoring, or failing to engage these constraints? I have considered how such an artistic orientation brackets off the

people, thereby standing the risk of transforming writing-in-society, writing as a social act, into an avenue for the author to express his stentorian monologue. An implication I have yet to consider is the over-aestheticizing of literature as a social resource (Brandist 69).

Literature is an aesthetic form, but it is also a social and cultural object. The idea that African writers have a social role is based on the assumption that their writings can have real effects on the social environment. This social quality of literature, however, is dependent, among other things, on the human elements, material conditions, and history of the social space. What this means is that literature does not change lives, transform selves and cultures, or catalyze resistance against power because of some eternal literary essence but through its interaction with the structural and human elements of society. It is within this context that I find the following remark by Osofisan about the social significance of art over-aestheticizing:

They [second-generation writers] have sought in various ways to unmask the hidden mechanisms behind the failures of our societies, and to build for us a picture of the ideal world that we should aspire towards. Against their tragic universe one painted with such eloquence by their predecessors, they have sought to erect a glittering Utopia...*This is the magical, inimitable force of art, its capacity to heal and empower us, and ultimately, humanize us* (Italics mine 24).

It is not that art cannot heal, humanize and empower but that it does not do these things through any “magical, inimitable power.” To say that literature functions, for example, as a tool for resistance and cultural transformation is to acknowledge

that literature exists in a material world, as a concrete object of social and cultural resource. It also means that literature cannot function outside of the institutional structures—peopled spaces, the publishing industry, government policies, international prizes, and academia— of which society is constituted. If this is the case, the literary is not an autonomous realm that exists and operates regardless of external material conditions.

I have given considerable attention to the ways in which earlier discourses on the writer's social role elide discourse, conceal power relations, relegate history, and smooth over social difference. However, I have not considered the other side of the coin. What are the consequences of having a deep awareness of one's subjective limits? Is exposure to and engagement with these limits productive or debilitating? What might a literary intellectual who is socially and materially embedded look like? What does it mean to engage with the complex constitution and temperament of "the people?" When Osofisan talks of "building a direct bridge to the audience," what discontinuities in the author-audience relationship are being bridged (22)? What conceptions about the artistic subject and about society underpin such an impulse? These are questions that some third generation Nigerian writers are beginning to consider and that I grapple with in the second chapter.

### **Conclusion: Third Generation Nigerian Writing**

According to Pius Adesanmi and Christ Dunton, co-editors of the 2005 special issue of *English in Africa* that focus on third generation Nigerian writings,

the writers grouped in this category are writers who were born after colonialism and the independence era. One consequence of this is that these writers do not have the revisionist or traditionalist sensibility of their predecessors. It is particularly significant that most of the major writers in his category—Chris Abani, Akin Adesokan, Helon Habila, and Sefi Attah—all come out of the Abacha era. For these writers, their formative years are steeped in circumstances that exposed the deep contradictions that define the Nigerian nation and the writer's role as intellectual. Maybe it is this historical particularity that engenders their aversion for totalizing conceptions both of the writing subject and of the collective. Adesanmi and Dunton give another reason:

We are dealing essentially with texts born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and the postmodern, an order of knowledge in which questions of subjecthood and agency are not only massively overdetermined by the politics of identity in a multicultural and transnational frame but in which the tropes of Otherness and subalternity are being remapped by questioning erstwhile totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbologies.

Questions about subjecthood and collective agency are at the heart of Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel*, a story about a writer's search for individual transcendence in writing and consequent exposure to the practical limits of the subjective self. Habila also represents a uniquely complex and perceptive representation of "the people" and its eclectic collection of cultural representations and expressions. Most significantly, Habila tries to envision what a relationship between the two—an intellectual aware of his own subjective



limitations and a socially diverse collective—might look like. This reversal of conceptions about self, writing and society and envisioning of new kinds of social relations make these new writings highly political both within the context of African literary tradition and the broader social environment in Africa.

Critical responses to third generation writings have not been altogether positive. Charles Nnolim, in a review of these writings published in the ANA Review, derisively describes the texts as somewhere “between debauchery and the kitchen” (8). It is not clear what Nnolim means by that statement, but the main idea of his review is that new Nigerian writings lack any ideological grounding and are morbidly pessimistic probably because of the violence wrought on the generation by military rule. There are those who, like Femi Osofisan, see their fraternity with postmodernism and postcolonialism as a hollow attempt at joining the bandwagon of fashionable theoretical preoccupations of Western literary scholarship. For many with this view, third generation writings are so foreign and contrived that they fail to offer the kind of political dream that has always animated African writings. On the other end of the spectrum are critics who see post-colonialism and post-structuralism as exacting liberatory influences on third generation writers. Stephanie Newell, in a recent review of West African writing, hails third generation writers for breaking free from the discursive shackles (in the guise of formulating an authentic African aesthetic) that compelled African writers to write within pre-given stipulations that sanctioned their works as “African” or not. In other words, these writers are trading a highly politicized

cultural nationalist project for stylistic and thematic experimentation, transcultural/transnational consciousness, and celebration of inter-subjectivity, hybridity, and the dissolution of fixed identity so that they can create an “unbounded imaginative space” (Newell 187).

To say that third generation writings are politically vacuous is to understand the political in a very narrow sense. In the same vein, these texts are not liberatory simply because they are post-colonial or post-structural in style or themes, but because of the questions such theoretical perspectives allow the authors to ask. It is also important to remind ourselves that, like their predecessors, third generation writers are working within particular discursive and historical parameters. In other words, questions about the writing self and society that they are asking are closely tied to their historical moment and its ideological terrain.

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## Chapter Two

### *Waiting for an Angel*

Chinua Achebe's statement, "an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant" (78), speaks to the socially and politically conscious beginnings of the African literary enterprise. During the struggle against colonialism, which continued long after the official exit of colonial rulers, writers and other artists collectively saw themselves as some sort of unofficial creative arm of a wider social, cultural, political, and economic powerhouse of resistance against both foreign and domestic oppression. In other words, African literature emerged in its modern form as a fundamentally public and social medium for a wide array of political efforts ranging from cultural/racial retrieval to historical revisionism to protest against colonial oppression.

As a result, writers saw themselves as public figures and their writings as resource for collective empowerment and enlightenment. One of the most representative articulations of this conception of the writer is Achebe's analysis of the role of the novelist in terms of teaching and cultural education. Soyinka also speaks of the writer as a social visionary, one whose ideological innovations initiate communal regeneration and renewal. The public image of the writer and his or her role have been constructed in many different ways since Achebe and Soyinka, and while some of these images have been successful, others have tended to be cloyingly humanistic or borderline authoritarian. Most significantly,

however, the public orientation of the African writer has been generally constructed in ways that elide ideological constraints and material conditions

For example, as I have addressed in the introduction, in spite of claims to some sort of co-existential relationship between writer, writing and society, African literary discourse has traditionally privileged an autonomous, transcendental writing subject with, arguably, authoritarian sensibilities. One could also argue that, in articulating the social and political justification for their art, African writers have not always engaged the consequences of being embedded in the social, the ideological implications of this embeddness, and other external material variables that come into play. As a result, one of the goals of this essay is to show how Helon Habila, in *Waiting for an Angel*, does not take the social function of the writer and the public performance of intellectual life for granted but instead makes the social “life of the [creative] mind” a major critical concern (Said 16). He does this by showing how ideological constraints and material conditions construct the creative mind and define the nature of its creative functions and relationship to the collective.

I would like to clarify that in engaging the contradictions and material/ideological complications of the public role of the literary intellectual, Habila does not necessarily do away with the question of writing in society or writing for collective survival, neither does he represent the social mandate of the African writer as some sort of grand narrative that needs to be deconstructed. Like Achebe and Soyinka, Habila upholds the traditional notion of the African writer

as a social figure and the notion that writing is a powerful tool for collective action against social power. What Habila does differently, however, is that he explores what Sartre calls the *historical particularity* of the writer's subjective constitution and function by exposing the ideological limitations and external constraints that make any autonomous and transcendental representation of the artist outmoded and detached from social realities (274). The consequences of this move, which is also the second part of my argument, is the "appearance of a new actor" (Said 14), a new creative subject who confronts the contradictions of his public role and opens up the possibility of new alliances between the literary intellectual and "the people."

*Waiting for an Angel* is set around the series of events that ushered in the years of terror during which General Sani Abacha ruled Nigeria. The mood Habila depicts so masterfully in this novel is one of despair and terror. The 90s were truly difficult times for Nigerians as they watched the unwieldy fragments their nation had become totter on the brink of destruction. At the wake of 1993, Nigerians thought that they were well on the way to establishing the most popular democratic government the nation had ever known. But by the first quarter of that same year, the country was plunged into the turmoil that led to Abacha's regime: yet another cycle of repressive military rule that came to be the most perverse of the lot. Abacha's execution of Ken Saro Wiwa, the writer-activist, and other such unpopular political actions earned Nigeria the ire of the international community and kept the sanctions piling up until Nigeria became a pariah nation. The

north/south divide of the country had become so polarized that there were rumors of an impending war. The uncertain outcome of the June 12 student riot, during which students fought en masse for democracy had left the youths politically enervated and disillusioned. Nigeria was a perfect example of what Tejumola Olaniyan calls “the postcolonial incredible” (2). What was unique about the Abacha regime and the reason that it recurs in a good number of third-generation Nigerian writings is that it was singularly inimical to literary creativity. It is not just that economic stagnation asphyxiated the literary life of the nation but also that writers were subjected to systematic victimization motivated by the paranoia and insecurities of those in government who saw writing as a threat to power. For writers, exile, imprisonment, silence, and sycophancy were the only options.

It is within this “paranoid context of persecuted print” that Habila situates his own articulation of the African writer’s social mandate (Wright 73). The force of Habila’s representations of the chaos and turmoil that characterized Nigeria of the 90s is that these representations show how the writer, in dispensing his or her public duties, is compelled to confront the subjective contradictions that make it difficult to let out a public message, social vision, or final truth; the contradictions that define the intellectual’s relationship with a social collective traced through by disruptive, fragmented and heterogeneous elements; and the contradiction embedded within transcendent expectations for the traditional African literary intellectual. In other words, Habila shows, quite convincingly, how the writer’s conception of self as a social functionary and his or her ability to dispense these



social functions are bound up with particular material situatedness and ideological restraints.

The act of literary expression is one of the contexts within which Habila engages the ideological restraints that the writer faces. In the poem, “The Pre-rain Streets at Dawn,” Habila speaks of “gaping/ mouths/that have lost their scream, their message” (49). This image of losing the ability to convey meaning aptly depicts the problem of literary expression that characterizes the condition of chaos and dissolution that Habila constructs in *Waiting for an Angel*. Habila comes from a literary tradition that has generally positioned the writer as a sovereign form of literary language, through which the writer expresses the truth of the people’s destiny unencumbered by any ideological, material, or historical situatedness. It is against this background that one can understand the significance of Habila’s contemplation of a different kind of writing subject in two major moments in the text.

One of these moments occurs when Lomba attempts to articulate Alice’s feelings of entrapment in terms of Kafka’s messenger. Lomba imagines that Alice, his heartthrob, feels trapped in the crowded hospital room where her mother lay dying and that she must feel despondent under the thickening and oppressive miasma of her mother’s cancerous gangrene. He imagines her feelings of entrapment to be similar to that of the messenger in Kafka’s *The Great Wall of China* who has, between him and the remotest part of the country where he is to

deliver an urgent message from the dying emperor, an impossible barrier to transcend.

No one knows more than the messenger the absolute futility of his mission—first he has to get out of the innermost chamber with its thousands and thousands of courtiers impeding his progress, and after that there are a thousand outer chambers to traverse, still filled with courtiers; and though he is able to get out of these chambers (it will take him years), how can he manage to elbow his way past the millions of people waiting in the courtyard? (69).

Clearly, this passage goes far beyond Alice's struggle with the fatality of her mother's illness, but rather depicts Lomba's own struggle with the realization that any transaction of meaning is contingent on forces outside of the creative will, material forces in the shape of people, place, and time. It does not matter that the messenger bears a message from the emperor or that he is willing to carry it to the ends of the earth as quickly as exigency requires; what determines the actual going forth of the utterance are the chambers, the courtyard—peopled spaces—he has to traverse. In a sense, Lomba is contemplating his own situation. Like the messenger, he has a message: stories that “could cure all the worlds' ills” (164). Like the messenger, after two years of agonizing writing, he is nowhere near finishing one of these stories or getting out their healing message.

Lomba's contemplation of the possibility of a failure in communication is not as a result of his lack of earnestness, as Achebe remarks about writers who dismiss the prophetic attribute of African literary creativity. The contingency of

creative expressivity on material conditions of possibility is something that does not appear to figure in Achebe's call for *earnestness* in the essay, "Colonial Criticism." In this essay, Achebe argues that earnestness ought to be the driving force behind courageous and responsible creative expression. In fact, thanks to being earnest, he has been able to "find for [himself] a little more room than has been allowed [him] in the world," which I am supposing is a room to speak and writer (57). Earnestness, Achebe notes, is also what empowers the creative writer to use "art to control his environment" (58). For Lomba as is the case with Kafka's messenger, the problem is not a lack of earnestness. He wants to transmit the emperor's message. He knows it is urgent, but he can't because of prevailing material conditions. Similarly, Lomba knows the ills of his world and wants to address it, but he can't because of the impossible material realities that face him: "dwindling readership in a situation of rising illiteracy and collapsing incomes...shrinking outlets for creative writing as inflation drives up the cost of publishing and of book prices, and of censorship and persecution" (Osofisan 28).

This moment in the text also dramatizes the necessarily collective nature of expression. The peopled spaces, the chambers, and the different compartments and barriers that stand between the messenger and the going forth of his message articulate the futility of any intellectual expression that attempts to transcend the heterogeneous, frenetic, and discordant human elements of the social environment. This is a reality that Lomba does not fully come to terms with until his later involvement with Poverty Street. Despite the social grounding of the

intention to tell stories that can cure all the ills in the world or to write the survival of the collective, Lomba sees writing as a venture of the individual creative mind. Unlike Kafka's messenger, Lomba does not yet understand the enormous limitations posed by his social and material embeddedness and the consequences of this for literary expression. Conveying a message goes beyond being earnest or having a private room or space from which to speak, as Achebe seems to suggest. Achebe's assumption about the literary subject and its expressive abilities clearly comes from an ideological perspective that allows the possibility for the creative figure to reside deep within the social to the extent of knowing the core of its condition and psyche, but somehow transcending its limitations and preserving creative individuality as an independent source of social meaning. Within the world Habila constructs, a world hemmed in by all sorts of external material limits, this form of artistic subjecthood is not only ahistorical but also divorced from social realities.

The orientation of Kafka's messenger in relation to his social environment is also helpful in understanding some of Lomba's later struggles with literary expressivity. One of the reasons that Kafka's messenger feels overwhelmed is the private nature of the message he bears. More accurately, though, it is not the message itself that is necessarily individual or private but the means of conveyance. It is quite possible that the Emperor has communicated to him a truth on which the survival of the whole world hangs—a message of collective importance. Even if that were the case, he would still feel entrapped and closed in

because he places the process of conveyance outside of the material reality of his surroundings. Consider, for example, the manner in which he positions himself in relation to the social barriers that separate him from his destination. He sees the vast collective in front of him as barriers that must be penetrated, transcended, elbowed-through, traversed but not engaged with, incorporated into the process of conveyance, or harnessed for productive communication. These considerations throw light not only on Lomba's initial tendency to shun the social, the public, and the political but also on the reason that Lomba never finds the individual transcendence he seeks in individual literary creativity.

Lomba's second contemplation on the problem of literary expressivity is tied to the messenger sequence because it dramatizes with more specificity the way in which Lomba experiences the feeling of entrapment that Kafka's messenger contemplates. In an attempt to flee from what he sees as external social limits, Lomba quits his university education and ends up in a small tenement room where, closed out from any meaningful contact with the world, he confines himself to writing a novel. One day, after two years of writing, he looks out the window and sees a group of teenage boys and girls frolicking in the sun. Struck by the beauty of their faces and their laughter, he wishes he were one of the boys, "out in the sun with a girl and so free" (105). Or else he could "return to bed, take an overdose of Valium and sleep" (105). The reason that Lomba desires so strongly to be free soon becomes apparent:

I looked at the papers spilling out of a thick folder on my table. The words and sentences, joined end to end, look ominously like chains, binding me forever to this table. I felt a deep, almost fanatical loathing for them. Two years, and still no single sentence made sense to me. Standing by the window, staring at the manuscript, I felt, with epiphanic clarity, that if I sat down and picked up my pen and added a sentence more to this jumbled mass, I'd die. The uncompleted novel would grow hands of iron and strangle me to death. (106).

Like Kafka's messenger, Lomba feels trapped, more specifically, by his inability to use language to convey meaning. It is possible that Habila is, here, representing the Foucauldian concept of language as something that exists outside of the creative subject and functions, in the creation of meaning, beyond any individual or autonomous intention of the artist. Habila, it can be argued, does not want to construct Lomba as a free, independent and founding subject who exercises mastery over language and meaning independently of his social and historical situatedness. Why, though, does language fail Lomba? Why does he fail to convey any kind of truth, whether private or collective, through language? Is it as a result of the type of language he is using, the location of the speech act, or the message itself? Or is it because he is ignoring the fundamentally collective and material nature of language?

Jean Paul Sartre, in "A Plea for Intellectuals," writes about the *materiality* of language. Sartre wants to argue that language has a material existence in a shared system of signification produced by history and the work of "men who speak *without agreement* with each other" (271). Is Sartre saying that language

and meaning are tied to material conditions—history, place, speaker, community, contest and negotiation of difference? If that is the case, then, might Lomba's inability to speak be as a result of the failure of the *type* of language he uses? This question is pertinent given the fact that language in itself, as a means of expression, is not what Lomba struggles with since he does journalistic writings without much difficulty. When he leaves his room, abandoning his novel temporarily and deciding to get a life, he goes to James Fiki, the managing editor of the *Dial*. To test Lomba's writing capabilities, James asks him to do a piece on the endless cycle of wretchedness among the disenfranchised masses. Lomba returns with an excellent feature article that would later play a vital role in the mass resistance of the Poverty Street community.

If as Sartre claims, language operates in the construction of meaning within a system closely linked to material conditions, Lomba's failure to express through creative language is possibly the outcome of trying to use the traditional African literary language, a language that, in its fossilized and idealist state, has become detached from the material realities of the frenetic and unstable urban world, moving speedily towards dissolution. What this means is that Lomba might be attempting to use a kind of creative language from a particular subjective orientation that may have been feasible at some point in African literary history but had become detached from present realities. The reason that language is not always obedient to literary intentions is that, as Foucault shows, language, just like the literary subject, is determined or produced by powerful

historical and material forces. As a result, communication is dependent on a productive engagement of the historical situatedness of the artistic subject and society. Lomba, though, is yet to understand this, as is evident in the assumption that he can lock himself up in a room, cut off from society and its material reality, and come out with a book that will cure all the ills in the world. It is James Fiki who helps him understand how the fruition of anything he creates in that room of his is contingent on the world outside of the room: the government, the publishing industry, even the readership. If these enabling material conditions do not exist, the product of his private literary creativity will remain private. It will take Lomba years of learning to realize that writing for survival happens outside, in society, among the collective and not within the private world of literary creativity.

To Lomba's credit, however, it is important to note that in bracketing off the social barrier that stand between him and the going forth of his artistic message, Lomba is towing the lines of his literary predecessors: the social visionary, the teacher, and so forth. For these forms of literary subjectivity, the expressive ability of the artist is something that comes as an intuition, beyond social and historical forces, outside of any external condition. The writer is naturally a social being and his or her writing is a social resource, ready the moment it is produced to begin to "heal," "humanize," and "empower" the masses (Osofisan 24). In the world Habila writes about, however, art has become so far removed from individual and collective survival that it can no longer bear the



truth of the people's political and social dream. It is interesting that Achebe writes, "Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality" (117). Not so in the world Habila constructs where art is distant from reality and, potentially inimical to survival. Compare Achebe's view on literature to James' outlook on art. After James gives Lomba a much-needed job as a journalist, he consoles Lomba, "someday you will finish that novel. But what matters right now is life. Remember life is short but art is long" (114). What James is essentially saying is that if Lomba continues on the path of writing that novel, he courts impoverishment, thereby risking his survival. There is a particularity and temporality about life that art does not have. Art, in its transcendental form, can afford to take leisurely flights from history and material realities but not so with life. Therefore, if Lomba wished to survive, he has to respond to the immediacy of life, something that art does not have or may have lost.

The point here is not that literature cannot humanize, convey the dreams of the people, articulate their angst, and empower, but that literature functions in these capacities as a variable dependent on prevailing material conditions. Some questions arise out of the foregoing analyses, and they are as follows: why does Habila represent the act of writing-in-society in two different ways: creative writing and journalism? What is traditional African literary language, and how is it fossilized and in relation to what? While both questions are pertinent and will be addressed eventually, I would, first, like to consider the implications of

Lomba's experiences of creative limits for his conceptions of his role as a literary intellectual.

So far, I have used Kafka's messenger to demonstrate how prevailing material conditions can prevent the writer from letting out his or her message and Lomba's experience of both failure and captivity in language to argue that language is yet another variable of material conditions that the writer must confront in his or her mission to make social meanings. There are also material constraints that are institutional in nature. The absence of something as fundamental as publishing opportunities is particularly crucial because it removes writing from the social arena, confining it to the writer's private world such that writing ceases to function as a medium of expressing a social dream. The key idea here is that even if, as Soyinka claims, the writer has "the voice of vision," she cannot sound it out due to the absence of the appropriate medium (Soyinka 20). Given this material condition of creative impossibility, in addition to a failing economy, poverty, and a repressive government that is hedging the writer more and more into a space of irrelevance, where and how does Lomba see himself in relation to the social mandate? Also, what assumptions anchor some of the ways in which Lomba positions himself in relation to his community?

Lomba's notion of writing as individual and private has always come with a strong sense of his subjective limitations. In fact, instances where Lomba moves inward in search of individual transcendence have always been triggered by exposure to material, creative, or subjective limits. There are several ways in

which Lomba's consciousness of his limitations are manifested. For example, unlike the Achebean teacher, Lomba does not presume to know. By knowledge, I mean the ability to read the condition of the people like a face, to know it as it is. Living in a world at the brink of chaos, Lomba admits, time and again, that he has problems of vision; he cannot see beyond the "fade to black and chaos" (65). He is no seer and no social visionary who not only foresees but also creates, maps, and projects future possibilities for the masses. In Lomba, Habila constructs a literary character that is "*situated*" (Sartre 273). He constructs a character that understands his historical/material particularity and how he is both restrained and enlightened by it. Being situated also means that Lomba is not Achebe's teacher who speaks of himself as exempt from the cultural conditioning he attributes to "the people" and from which he purports to save them. Lomba is able to function as an intellectual in the Poverty Street riot partly because he has lived among them, written about them, and feels as trapped, pauperized, abused, and befuddled as they are.

Yet, Lomba is no Mbari artist. The Mbari artist is an artistic representation formulated by Achebe that involves the effacing of artistic self by dispersing it in an organic, communal will. The concept of the Mbari artist comes from Achebe's attempt to exemplify the distinctly collectivist nature of African literature. Invoking the spirit of the village-square tales-by-moonlight culture of collective ownership of various art forms such as stories, dances, and songs Achebe posits that African literature is not driven by the will-to-ownership as is

the case with European literary culture. In other words, the African artist and the community are in a kind of co-creative relationship. Indebted to the community for his or her creative powers, the artist wills whatever he or she creates to the community such that at the end of the day nobody really owns what has been created. The aim of Achebe's conception of African writers in terms of Mbari artists is to show how, unlike their European counterparts who seek self-realization in the individuality of their creative productions, African writers shun self-realization for the propagation, regeneration, and animation of communal creative will.

In many ways, Lomba deviates from the Mbari artistic figure since he desires the possibility of securing the sanctity of his individuality through writing. Despite his eventual involvement with collective resistance, Lomba struggled with a strong desire for artistic separateness from society. For instance, when Lomba insists that he is not political, he wants to say that he does not feel a connection with a social collective. It is not surprising that he is not moved by the student leader's fist-waiving address on the day of the student riot. Listening to Sankara splutter platitudes in the name of Soyinka and Cabral, Lomba remarks that he "felt cold," unmoved, "like an impostor, out of place" (48). Long After the riots, Lomba locks himself up in a room and tries to write a novel for two whole years. This desire to be connected to society only marginally is the result of a strong sense of creative individuality he possesses. In fact, this individualistic sensibility drives his creative pursuits. When Lomba goes back to his room after

the riot to see manuscripts of his short stories and poems scattered all over the room and down the corridor, Lomba's anguish seems to be less over the loss of his works than at what he perceives as an infraction on the boundaries of his creative individuality:

I picked up a paper from the floor; it was a poem, *my* poem. I picked up another; it was a page from one of *my* short stories. I looked at the other papers, recognizing *my* handwriting, scared to bend down and gather them. Most of them were torn; boots had marched upon them, covering the writing with thick, brown mud. I felt the imprint of boots on *my mind*; I felt the rifling, tearing hands ripping through *my soul*. All I could think of as I stood there, with the torn, mud-caked papers in my hand and around me, was: I have been writing these stories and poems for as long as I can remember now, *these are my secret thoughts and dreams*...I just couldn't leave them lying around like that, *my own creations*...I gathered them in a pile on the grass and set them to fire. My eyes filled with tears as I watched the pages curl and blacken in the flames. (Italics mine 71-72).

What are at stake here for Lomba are *his* soul, *his* mind, and *his* creations, not the fate of any larger collective. Those scattered and muddied sheets are his "secret [or private] thoughts and dreams" and not the political and cultural aspiration of a people. His writings provided the last bastion of individual sanctity in a nation where the individual meant nothing, where no space was closed to the incursion of power. Reduced to the daily grind of vegetative survival, the individual had been effaced among the teeming crowd of battered and faceless drudges. Faced with this reality, writing becomes the prickly pin, the thing that tells him that his

sense of individuality has not been completely obliterated. He once remarked that discussing his poems with someone “gave him some kind of vague hope, a sense of place in the larger scheme of things.” It is, perhaps, this same “place” that Lomba desires when, in prison, he writes to “rediscover [his] nullified individuality” (3).

Finding his scattered and muddled manuscripts on the floor is also a centrally pristine moment of learning for Lomba. It is at that moment that he realizes the invasive power of the military regime where the sacredness of the mind and soul means nothing. If the army can invade the ivory tower to trample on and imprint its boots on the creative mind, what other limits can it not transgress? The presence of the army and its paranoia for writing constitutes yet another aspect of the material condition against which writing occurs or fails to occur in Habila’s Nigeria. Faced with poverty, imprisonment, both mental and physical brutality by the military, and the breakdown of creative infrastructure, the ability of the writer to convey a message is greatly limited. As for Lomba, his experience with limiting circumstances only drives him further into his creative shell, intensifying the desire for individual autonomy:

I was not coming back to [the university]...As I turned and surveyed the gate and the fences beside it, I saw the fences suddenly transform into thick walls, standing tall, top-tufted with barb wire and broken bottles, arms widespread to restrain and contain and limit. I wanted no more limits; only those I set for myself. (74).

But, this idea that individuality is realizable in writing is eventually complicated by further exposure to subjective limits, for, as Lomba will find out after two

years of writing in seclusion, the intent to “restrain and contain and limit” resides beyond the looming walls of the university. It is in the widespread economic paralysis, in the proliferation of martial codes, in the piles of international sanctions transforming Nigeria into a pariah nation, in the stifling of creative voices due to a moribund publishing industry, in political censorship, and, paradoxically, in the search for individual autonomy and transcendence through writing. So, how far is his desire for freedom going to take him? How is he going to escape all external limits?

A few years after he “escapes” the confining walls of the university, Lomba finds himself in prison, still writing to transcend the limits of the prison walls, to preserve a steadily corroding individual self; as he puts it, “to reduce the weight of these walls on my shoulders, to rediscover my nullified self” (3). That writing holds the promise of reversing the process of self-dissolution in prison is attested to by Soyinka’s vivid remarks, in *The Man Died*:

“a clean virgin sheet of typing paper is a spring...an oasis when hope is gone and the tongue is glued to its roots...A vast expanse of shore after the shipwreck that gives the survivor an assurance of his human identity.”  
(Qtd. in Nnolim 45).

It is a similar kind of assurance and centeredness that Lomba seeks in keeping a secret diary and helping Muftau, the prison superintendent, to write love poems. What Lomba finds at the end of the day, however, is not “an oasis of hope” but

the painful realization that as far as his hands are in chains, he has no individual self to crystallize. All that is left of him is:

Nothing but a mass of protruding bones, unkempt hair and tearful eyes; an asshole for shitting and farting, and a penis that in the mornings grows turgid in vain. This leftover self, this sea-bleached wreck panting on the iron-filing sands of the shores of the penal island is nothing but hot air, and hair, and ears cocked, hopeful...(23).

The obvious significance of this emphasis on the body is that it is Lomba's way of contemplating finitude. Less ostensibly, it points to the fact that the body and its curse of finitude supplant Lomba's initial idealist expectations for writing in bondage. For Lomba, therefore, imprisonment, a material condition of captivity, reduces one to "a body," to one's existential limits and, therefore nullifies any aspiration of finding individual transcendence in the literary understood as an autonomous realm.

That Lomba envisions the literary as an autonomous realm that can be detached from material realities is evident in some of the kinds of writings he does while in prison. At Muftau's command, Lomba begins to write love poems about "perennial" and "endless charms" and to craft artful bowdlerizations of Sappho's odes (20). Writing love poems for Muftau's girlfriend, if nothing else, gives Lomba the possibility of fulfilling private dreams, lost at different moments in his writing life, of writing his individual survival, of centering himself, of finding some sort of foothold in order "to rediscover his nullified self" (3). When Janice, Muftau's girlfriend, questions him about the coded cries for help he



embeds in the poems, he realizes that the S.O.S messages are not really for her but are written by him to his soul, “to every other soul, the collective soul of the universe” (28). One could also read Lomba’s re-conception of the S.O.S message as a movement from an individual to a much more collective sensibility of the literary. Nevertheless, in poems, in writing, he hopes to find comfort, a center, a gathering point for his shattered self. Recall Soyinka’s depiction of the value of writing in imprisonment as the last bastion of sanity “when all hope is gone” and “the tongue is glued to its roots” (Qtd. in Nnolim 45). Not so with Lomba for even though Lomba entertains these desires for a while, he later ends his writing services for the superintendent, lamenting that he has “realized that [he] really had no self to express,” that “that self had flown away from [him] the day the chains touched his hands” (23). The chains binding his hands—the material reality of his bondage—is what reduces him to his bodily limits. The same chains also engender the desire for individual transcendence of limits.

Even before he goes to prison, Lomba comes to learn that, especially within the context of overpowering external limits, writing for survival occurs outside, in the society, and not necessarily in the artist’s own private world. Perhaps Lomba’s learning curve is the longest at the moments where he tries to make a clean divide between a private and a public world of writing. Sometimes, Lomba likes to see things in binary opposites: private/public dreams, art/politics, etc. When Joshua Amusu requests that he cover the story of the Poverty Street rally, Lomba is quick to refuse on the grounds that he writes about “art and

literature” not politics (191). In this instance, Lomba seems to be the one “gliding above the world,” the one who has lost hold on reality (Sartre 273). What “art and literature” is he writing about? Is he not living in a country where most forms of creative production, especially literary production, are virtually nonexistent? Meanwhile, it has been three years since he dropped out of the university with the hope of writing a novel, a novel for which he is yet to find a “satisfactory denouement” (192). Does he not realize that his inability to finish the novel and the near impossibility of finding a publisher even when he finishes it is all connected to politics? As James notes, even if he finds a publisher for his book in Nigeria, he might not be able to reach an international audience by participating in the competition for the Common Wealth Prize for literature because that very morning Nigeria had been kicked off the Common Wealth of Nations due to the increasingly reactionary activities of its government. How can Lomba make a clean divide between art and politics, James wonders, when “in [Nigeria] the very air [you] breath is politics” (108)? For James, politics is connected to art because politics plays a vital role in creating the material conditions that make art possible. Beyond simply making art possible, politics also enables the machinery that renders art a social organ and moves art away from the private world of the artist to a wider audience. If the political/economic/social terrain does not change, James seems to want to say, Lomba’s novel will remain in his drawer, a private, inert dream of a solitary writer that never comes to fruition

A key issue that has not been addressed thus far and that has been largely taken for granted is the issue of Lomba's status as an intellectual. The preceding analyses have centered on Lomba's attempts to use writing as a means to individual survival in the face of material conditions that constrict his creative, physical and existential limits. It has also become apparent that all of Lomba's creative flights from all the social and physical walls he detests so much have been largely unsuccessful. Maybe this is because, as James notes, the force of writing as an act of resistance against social power lies in its social quality. One can justifiably claim that James is simply restating a staple truth of African literary discourse that upholds the necessarily social nature of writing. Nevertheless, the value of James's influence on Lomba is that it compels Lomba to contemplate his intellectual status, to take writing beyond the confines of his private desires and put it to work for the collective. In other words, exploring Lomba's intellectual life affords the opportunity to see how Habila might be posing new questions about the constitution and function of the African literary intellectual.

Lomba does not always see himself as an intellectual, as is evident in his hesitation to pronounce himself a writer. Lomba always makes it a point to correct people when they assume he is a writer by saying that he is only trying to become one. He is a journalist but not a writer. Throughout the novel, Lomba seems trapped in a moment of literary inchoateness, for he is always in the process of becoming a writer but never fully becoming one. It is clear that Lomba uses the

word “writer” as a way of referring to someone who does creative writing, a particular kind of writing that can be differentiated from other forms of writing such as journalism. Admittedly, there is nothing remarkable about this distinction that Lomba makes. But, if we move away from semantics, it is possible to conclude that Lomba might be using the word “writer” as a social function or status. For Lomba, as is evident in his discussion with Alice, a key condition for becoming a writer is getting a publication out. Consequently, publishing is the moment when a writer’s work moves away from the closed world of the artist and enters the social world and begins to act as an object of social and cultural resource. In other words, literary work does not begin to perform a social function until it commands a public audience by being published. What this means is that a writer becomes a social functionary, an intellectual, when his or her work is published.

There is another reason that Lomba is reluctant to proclaim himself a literary intellectual. If the African intellectual is anything like Achebe’s teacher whose self-assured stentorian voice gives forth healing messages to a down-trodden and guileless masses, Lomba is probably not one. In a way, Achebe’s novelist is a traditional intellectual in the Gramscian sense. As a teacher, he anchors his intellectual status on a public role that enjoys historical continuity. Teachers function in a role that has enjoyed social relevance from time immemorial<sup>3</sup>. Besides, as a teacher, the writer does not have to vie for the consent

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<sup>3</sup> The same goes for Soyinka’s social visionary or seer or mythopoet.

of the people (Said 4). In fact, the assumption is that the interests of the novelist and the people are harmonious before the fact. If, at all, there is any possibility for disagreement, the novelist's aspiration for the collective takes precedence given that he commands knowledge, language, and meaning. I like to think of this intellectual persona as the traditional African literary figure. Lomba does have a stint as a teacher in an extra-mural, after-school program, but it is solely "for [his] bread" (106). But that is not what Achebe is referring to when he speaks of the writer's role in terms of public education. Instead, Achebe is thinking about how the literary intellectual can play a central role in disseminating the moralist and humanist values of mass cultural education. Lomba, though, as I have mentioned earlier, does not have the kind of knowledge on which such a role is contingent. He has no birds-eye view through which he sees and knows the world without being subject to the pressures of that world. Half the time, he is as bewildered as the masses and as battered as they are.

Note that I am not arguing that African writers are traditional intellectuals but that the image or function Achebe attributes to them is. Ever since the nationalist struggle, the discourse of intellectual role and identity established writers as brokers of culture, society, and politics without giving much attention to the ways in which this role was born out of material conditions traced through by difference, contests, and heterogeneity. Admittedly, though, the conditions of struggle under which these writers were writing may have prompted these presumptions. As Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton note, "the imperative of

historical revisionism transformed colonialism into the master narrative whose claims first and second generation writers sought to deconstruct and this led to a traditionalization of creative space and idiom.” With colonialism as the master narrative, it was easy to overlook the discontinuities and heterogeneity that defined “the people” and their relationship with literary intellectuals. However, these discontinuities and the complications they create for the intellectual would become apparent in due time.

This analysis serves the purpose of putting Lomba’s notion of the intellectual status to scrutiny. Only traditional intellectuals conceal their process of becoming by attributing their status to “their uninterrupted historical continuity and special qualification” (1139), which is often beyond questioning. Since Lomba does not have any of such traditional roles to latch on to, it is possible to actually see how he *becomes* an intellectual and, therefore, to not take his eventual status and function of as intellectual for granted. How, though, does Lomba become an intellectual? I have already mentioned the possibility of becoming published as some sort of certification of a writer’s intellectual status. Lomba’s eventual abandonment of that route can be easily accounted for simply by the lack of publishing opportunity due to prevailing material circumstances. A far more productive reason is that Lomba has the opportunity to witness the inefficacy of the traditional literary intellectual or, at least, what it had become at a time of deep national crisis. The incident I am referring to here is the meeting of all the writers in Lagos that turns into a bacchanalia.

James and Lomba have just visited the slave museum where James, responding to Lomba's refusal to be involved in the Poverty Street demonstration, impresses upon Lomba the necessarily collective nature not just of resistance but, most importantly, of writing as resistance. James explains that the reason power is often inimical to collective activities is that any possibility for resistance is reduced when the oppressed is isolated. Slave traders ensured isolation amidst physical proximity by breaking down communication among slaves, putting people who spoke different languages together. In their own fight for survival against a repressive regime that exploits the fragmented and contestatory nature of the civil space, words have to be linked into one another like chains to break the silence of oppression. However, the process of making writing useful for collective resistance and survival is a process that needs an intellectual organ, a powerful, organized entity that would "encourage legitimate criticism" and aid collective resistance (196). James is clear about what this organ is: the media. I will explore possible implications of this shortly, but for now, what is key is that after this compelling argument, Lomba appears ready to begin an intellectual mission.

As a result, it is rather auspicious that Lomba and James find themselves in a meeting of poets, novelists, and fine artists. The artists are meeting in response to the indiscriminate and widespread arrest, victimization, imprisonment, and exile of writers who speak against the government. Somewhere along the way, though, the party transforms into a "bacchanalia"

(216). At a moment when the country seems to be at its final hour, a group of published “writers,” certified as literary intellectuals with unquestioned authority to lead the people out of their moment of crisis are drinking, dancing, vomiting, and chatting about the possibility of using arrest and imprisonment as means of escaping the muddle the country has become. Lomba is stymied:

There should be wailing instead of laughter, tears instead of beers...this is a crazy, reverse wake where no one is allowed to cry, and which has imperceptibly degenerated into a bacchanalia. (216).

This moment in the text is particularly caustic in its criticism of the political and social vacuity of a particular kind of artistic orientation. It is an artistic orientation that deludes the artist into thinking that he or she is the voice of the people even though reality suggests differently. It is in the language of these estranged and culturally/socially exiled artists that one fully understands the extent of their detachment from social realities.

A young poet has just come up to the floor to read a poem “dedicated to Akin and Ogaga, and Dele Giwa<sup>4</sup> and all brothers and sisters in the struggle” (213). The poem titled “Now is the Time,” is amateurish and cloyingly optimistic about the Nigerian condition, as is evident in the quote below:

Now is the time  
To stifle forever  
The crafty demons of this earth that

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<sup>4</sup> These are names of real Nigerian writers—Akin is a novelist, Ogaga is a poet, and Dele Giwa was a journalist—who are iconic representations of the literary war against repressive regimes in Nigeria’s history of resistance.



Daily clip our wings. Now our sun  
 Is rising, our gloom lifting. Now is  
 The time to cast off the iron that binds us. (214).

First, the irony of the poem's optimism and triumphant resistance as symbolized in a rising sun lies in the fact that, amidst the tumultuous events that had taken place earlier in the day—the attempted arrest of James, the burning of the Dial office, the proposed riot of Poverty Street—Lomba has been unusually attentive to the temperamental nature of the sun. All through that section of the text, Lomba has been making repeated references to the apocalyptic darkening and gloominess of the sun. It is also ironic to read this poet's misplaced optimism and egregious misrepresentation of reality in terms of Osofisan's remarks about the creative writer:

I am saying that, in a way that what the report of the journalist cannot do, or often fail to do, literature, if only we will read it, can offer us a comprehensive picture of our countries and our peoples, which is capable of arming us against despondency, and our feeling of helplessness. (14)

The writers that Lomba meets are different. They are cut off from the material reality of the people and of the nation not because they do not know that the nation is neck-deep in crisis but because they have lost their message, their voice, and their connection to the people. For one thing, the present masses are not the same ones whose condition Achebe's novelist-teacher could define in a sentence a couple decades ago, neither is the terrain the same one from which Soyinka's visionary could stand and project future possibilities. Existing within conditions

that are unwieldy to their traditional roles, these writers recede into a private artistic world where they are momentarily shielded from the historical crisis of their becoming. In a sense, Achebe's worst fears have finally come true: writers have been driven to the fringes of society.

The poem referred to earlier plays a key role in understanding the extent to which writing, in its traditional sense, had lost its capacity to facilitate a link between the literary intellectual and the people. Without any close reading of the poem, it is obvious that it exemplifies a crucial failure in communication between the literary intellectual and the people, for while the poem is proclaiming a blind optimism, the people of Poverty Street are actively talking about their social and economic condition, finding ways to change it, and are even writing about it. Nancy's disjointed graffiti are more precise about the urban condition than the stilted eloquence of the poem. Nevertheless, the poet and the people of Poverty Street live in the same country and are both stranded in the same economic and political quagmire. Why, then, does it appear that they represent their conditions differently? Why has the creative language of literature ceased to convey both the condition and the mind of the masses? Why does there seem to be a conflict between literary and popular apprehensions of the nation's condition? Can it be that the relationship of identification between the writer and society that has been traditionally presumed to be a given is now in crisis?

My guess is that the possibility for a failure of communication has always been present. Like any other society, African societies have always been defined

by difference drawn along the lines of ethnic identity, gender, social class, etc. In fact, as Anne McClintock argues, the nation is constructed amidst a terrain of social and cultural contests where groups seek to protect their interests and vie for limited material and cultural resources. Intellectuals play a vital role in facilitating the performance of this contest, which is why it seems idealist to claim that the people will always find the harmonious voice of their vision in the literary intellectual. To further complicate the contestatory nature of social spaces, the lines of difference are often drawn and redrawn in relation to the direction of power. This is precisely the reason that given the centrality of colonialism as the origin of external power and the revisionist efforts it spurned, writers were able to represent their societies in homogenous terms, thereby blurring lines of differences and contestations. The point I am making here is that failure of communication as a result of differences among group interests is not an outcome of momentary crisis but an essential part of the social terrain as defined by material conditions. The discontinuity dramatized in the starkly different representations of the Nigerian condition in the world of the writers and that of *Poverty Street* is the result of deep-running ruptures that simply needed the right condition to surface. For example, “the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa” that Achebe speaks of during the 60s and 70s have changed somewhat by time Lomba is struggling to formulate his intellectual trajectory (78). It is quite normal to hear Achebe or Soyinka ask in the 60s, what does it mean to be African or black and what has colonialism got to do with it? In

Lomba's Nigeria the questions will be much different. What does it mean to be a Nigerian, an Ibo, a rural woman, or a youth from the Niger Delta and what has military dictators and corrupts civilian rulers got to do with it? In the society Habila constructs, the complexities and contradictions that have always defined the composition of the masses has become more apparent, calling for a different kind of intellectual positioning. Living within such a condition but still holding on to the image, culture and language of the traditional literary figure and its traditional relationship with society, creative writers, as represented in the novel, lose the ability to organize the interests of different groups that make up the popular collective. Their image, culture, and language have become idealist to the extent that "unable to adapt to the unresolved problems of informal social life, they are unequipped to respond to the frenetic, fragmented, and heterogeneous constitution of the masses set against a background of material and cultural disintegration" (Brandist 63).

It is not just that literary culture is detached from the aspirations and culture of the people but also that it is in conflict with it. African literary language, like any other language, is a "social product and the cultural expression of a group," which makes it neither sealed from but reciprocally in interference "with other languages and culture within society" (Brandist 62-63). I think that there is much to be gained conceptually in positioning African literary language, even if just for the sake of argument, as a form of official, high culture, which functions not just as a given but also as an exemplary language set in opposition

to other cultures and languages. This relationship of conflict is most ostensible in the uncertain relationship creative writers have always had with journalists, at least, on a discursive level. Osofisan is one critic who has written quite a bit on not just the differences between creative writing and journalism but, most significantly, on the ascendancy of creative language over journalistic writing. In a lecture at Leeds University, where he warns against the danger of pessimism and its effect on resistance efforts, he positions journalism and literature as two social organs that write and speak the nation differently:

Newspapers of course we read regularly, or nowadays, the Internet. But not of our poets. We read these events that move us to shame or despair; but not of the poet's reflections on them, these seeds of wisdom which the writer helps to extract from such events, the conclusions which would help us better to understand, and hence master our destiny. We read the journalist's reports, but the writer's musings which go beyond those photographic recollections to teach and empower us, pass unheard. And so we miss a crucial aspect of our reality, that aspect which deals with the other side of our sad condition, which the heroes who are fighting against the injustices of our societies, and who, in the world of our creative writers, are inspiring legends. (14).

Osofisan's criticism of journalistic tendency towards sensationalism is probably timely, and his idea that the celebration of resistance rather than the proliferation of pessimism is a better catalyst for survival is valid. What is most valuable for this analysis, however, is the apparent contest for authority to write the nation evident in Osofisan's claims that literature rather than journalism has the language and culture of profundity that can enlighten the people on the mastery of their destiny. The contest over who can write the nation best is even more apparent in a

speech Osofisan gives at the National Festival of Arts and Culture that is aptly titled, “The Writer, the Artist, and the Journalist, as Mirrors of the Nation’s Ethos.” The journalist, Osofisan remarks, “is merely a mirror or megaphone, an objective and transparent medium who does no more than transmit the message as he receives it” (32). The writer, in contrast, is “the glass prism” “whose vision interferes with and imposes an interpretation on the message” (32). Even though there are stylistic evidence for some of the claims make here, it is not clear how they serve as bases for the cultural power relations he suggests in the following statement:

The artist is certainly the most central to the needed work of mobilization, because he possesses the means of producing the images and metaphors which are capable of having seductive and lasting effects on our minds, and therefore, of molding us toward a particular kind of human being or citizen, or nation. (37).

Osofisan seems to suggest that the artist is privy to a special knowledge indispensable to nation-formation and preservation, which, then, ought to place the artist in a position of power in relation to cultural production and social mobilization. However, Osofisan is not clear about how the writer comes to this knowledge. Besides, by attributing the knowledge or truth the artist claims to bear to the “artist’s solitary genius” (Osofisan 36), Osofisan moves the process of the artist’s social becoming to the realm of the autonomous and transcendent, beyond history, beyond questioning. Osofisan also is not forthcoming about how the artist’s monopoly of profundity in language and literary culture translates to social mobilization for collective action against power. Might Osofisan be over-

aestheticizing complex social processes that are highly dependent on material determinants? Might it be that Osofisan constructs African literary culture as a hegemonic entity by situating it as an “exemplary unity” and as “a unitary, organic, explicitly formulated” official entity? These are compelling questions to consider because they open up the possibility that, for Osofisan, “the process of ideological struggle appears to be wholly linguistic” (Brandist 72).

In the literary terrain Osofisan constructs, the position of journalists in relation to the writer is clear: journalists “make provision for the artist to voice his views” while “submit[ing] to be ready collaborator in this respect” (38). This younger-brother position Osofisan attributes to the journalist is in stark contrast to James’s belief that the work of the mass media is at the heart of establishing the social lines of communication needed for collective resistance (which he describes as joining word to word to form a sentence). He says, “that is our work, the media: to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find” (169). The force of James’s conception of the journalist-intellectual lies in the fundamentally popular and collective nature of journalism. I will explore this concept shortly, but, at this point, it is important to note that I am not arguing that journalism is somehow a more liberatory social institution because of its popular nature, and I don’t think that is what Habila is doing by constructing Lomba, a journalist, as heroic and disrobing creative writers in the caustic caricature he presents of them playing the fiddle while the country is burning. Rather, Lomba, a character traced through by subjective contradictions and the pressure of material

conditions and whose journalistic sensibility is free of the “fossilized and pompous” rhetoric of the traditional literary figure, dramatizes more effectively the appearance of the new intellectual (Brandist 63).

The two main intellectual figures in the novel are Lomba and Joshua, and while they are both organic to the community they represent, they do not come to their intellectual status in the same manner. Lomba, whose struggle with individual transcendence and aversion for the political and social have already been addressed, has a longer learning curve. He lives in Poverty Street for about two years during which he attempts to write the novel that is never completed. Before he leaves the tenement room on Poverty Street to pursue a career as a journalist, he writes a feature article about the inhabitants of the street that is published in the *Dial* and later forms the basis for his co-optation into the Poverty Street demonstration. Joshua, on the other hand, has a more traditional persona. He is a literature teacher who commands the respect of most people living in the Poverty Street area. He is also thought to be knowledgeable, to be “the only person that knew anything about anything on Poverty Street” (122). He reads Karl Marx and thinks *Treasure Island* is a good read for a 15 year-old. He hopes to get married and have a family one day and upholds the humanistic ideal of achieving anything with a strong enough desire and hard work. Most of all, he understands the value and function of dreaming, especially, dreaming as a way of writing survival. But, as Lomba observes, Joshua is no simpleton. Under this normative exterior is an intensity that, according to Lomba, is almost fanatical. And unlike



Lomba, he has always been involved in politics. Joshua is the one who comes to James' office to request that Lomba cover the Poverty Street demonstration.

Joshua is also the one who leads this demonstration that the people on Poverty Street like to call "the revolution" (159). Habila constructs two different intellectual identities in Lomba and Joshua. Lomba's tendencies towards artistic individuality, especially within an African setting, stand as a radical flight from society as an oppressive totality while Joshua's authoritative, traditional, and humanistic persona seems more conventional. Through these opposing representations of the intellectual, Habila avoids any rigid definition of the intellectual identity as either iconoclastic or traditional.

Poverty Street is a subterranean coastal world of star-crossed dreamers who bear the daily strain of endless dream deferrals and the persistent battery of their wretched condition. With its grim-caked houses, fragile shanties, brothels, wandering mongrels, and indigent populace choked within heaps of garbage, Poverty St. seems like a derelict "underwaterscape" hastily washed ashore by the ocean's restless water (126). It is a community of people who, with not much else to live on, live on dreams in a desperate attempt to escape an unbearable present and to "to fill the gaps of [their] impoverished reality" (Brandist 64). Poverty St. is also a kind of Fanonian outland where disenfranchised intellectuals—the fist waving Mao, Joshua, Hagar, and Lomba—live among disenfranchised masses.

The outcome of the intermingling of these disparate elements that constitute the community is a fragmented heterogeneity that is most evident in the

rhetorical culture. Brother's marijuana-induced, fantastic, and drawn-out dream-tales about his farewell party for Mr. Poverty are as much an articulation of the urban muddle as Nancy's terse and pithy graffiti. There is Mao, the new college graduate, whose fist-waving and often unintelligible blather of Marxian and Fanonian platitudes—comprador bourgeoisie, lumpen proletariat, “violence can only be overcome by greater violence,” etc— contrasts Joshua's measured and often perceptive impressions on life on Poverty Street (157-158). Then there is Madam Godwill whose conception of the precariousness of urban existence is embodied in the name of her restaurant, Godwill, which, as Kela remarks, is “a worldview, not a sign-painter's error” (144). Of Hagar, the college dropout turned prostitute, Kela remarks, “her talk was disjointed, like a cured deaf-mute testing her voice for the first time. She asked questions and never waited for the answer before veering off on to something else” (151). As is typical of most popular social spaces, Poverty Street's public discourse is vari-accented, fragmented, and heterogeneous.

These different modes of writing or speaking the urban are not always euphonious. For example, Brother's dream-narrative is the antithesis of Nancy's disjointed epigrams that she writes all over the walls of Madam Godwill's Restaurant: a social space of some sort for members of the community. Her graffiti are anything from “proverbs, clichés, epigrams, even couplets” and are largely, at least ostensibly, disjointed (132). “To be a man is not a days' work;” “Today here, Tomorrow gone;” “Such is life;” “Love is a Gamble;” and “Poor

man's paradise..." are a few examples. It is apparent that as clichéd as they are, these epigrams function as a fragmentary but loaded articulation of existential truths about the urban world: precarious, shifting, dizzyingly dislocating, unpredictable. Brother, on the other hand, is verbose in his embroidered remembering of his Biafran days and in his fantastic stories about sending Mr. Poverty off with celebration and fanfare. Brother's dreams and fantasies do not just function as escape from the drudgery of his impoverishment but also serve as a way of writing or telling the absences, the lack that begets the fantasies in the first place. For Brother, it is as Joshua notes, "people become dreamers when they are not satisfied with their reality, and sometimes they don't know what is real until they begin to dream" (119).

The value of exploring the differences between Brother's way of speaking the urban world and Nancy's way of writing it is that the vari-accented culture of expression within popular collectivity and its contestatory nature become apparent. It is this diversity and conflict that is dramatized in the comical but poignant altercation between Nancy and Brother. The conflict that resulted in Brother having a hot plate of Okra soup upturned on his head started out with one of Nancy's graffiti, "Poor man's paradises..." It is not clear how Nancy understands the statement given the ellipsis that comes right after (132), neither is it clear why Brother feels personally attacked and humiliated by it. My guess is that, for someone such as Brother who lives on dreams, it may have been that the statement infracts upon his dream world, the last bastion of sanity, by portraying

it as an impoverished utopia. Nonetheless, what stands out about Poverty Street is that it is defined by a considerable level of social awareness performed and expressed within a space defined by rhetorical diversity and conflict.

This discordant, unstable, contentious, and fragmented rhetoric of the popular collective often has “critical potential” and can be “the repository of many anti-hegemonic strategies”; however, its fragmented and unstable nature is not always productive of effective counter-hegemonic efforts (Brandist 63). What this means is that even though there may be anti-hegemonic possibilities amidst the rowdiness and instability of the popular social space, counter-hegemonic efforts are easily stifled amidst the general lack of **organic**. The fragmentary and discontinuous apprehension of “the people’s” material reality might also be signs of a limited awareness of the broader historic processes of the national collective. It is within this social and cultural context that the intellectual emerges not to speak for the people but to harness their potential for resistance by speaking with them. Gramsci sees such an intellectual orientation as organic.

The organic intellectual, for Gramsci, is one who “rises from the masses only to organize and activate those masses by setting the direction for ‘cultural policy’” (Brandist 67). Joshua functions as an intellectual by bringing the dissonant and inchoate social discourse of the people to a more refined, articulate, and critical level. Joshua understands, as Mao does, that a revolution is inevitable, but unlike Mao, he knows that the revolution in China and Russian are not transposable models for resistance efforts in Poverty Street and that petrol bombs

and a couple of knives and guns will probably not make for a meaningful struggle against the government. Like Brother, Joshua knows that the people's economic impoverishment has to be alleviated; however, Joshua can articulate this necessity much better than Brother's phantom expulsion of poverty, personified. Nevertheless, for Joshua, Brother's exaggerated narratives of past glories and future conquests are legitimate forms of urban narration. "Hyperbole," Joshua remarks about Brother's tall tales, "is a legitimate device in storytelling. Most stories, in order to achieve maximum effect, have to be exaggerated" (129). He learned and precise representation of the urban world more practical and efficient but is still one among the many forms of expression that cater to the social diversity of the urban space. His voice does not silence the others and is never established as exemplary or authoritarian. Joshua does not animate, originate, or ignite the revolution. Like Lomba, he is co-opted by the people to lead. On the day of the "revolution," Mao and his band of youths, Brother and his hangers-on, teenage girls and boys, Hagar and her fellow brothel dwellers, and the women in their Sunday dresses are as much a part of the revolution as Joshua, who gives the protest speech, and Lomba who covers the story from the sidelines.

Any attempt to read Habila's representation of an instance of collective resistance as idealist or as some sort of romanticizing of the popular is precluded by uncertain outcome of the revolution. Countless numbers of the "revolutionaries" are maimed and others flee the urban world for their villages. Hagar dies. Lomba is arrested and imprisoned. Joshua becomes a fugitive. The

force of the Poverty Street “revolution” lies less in its outcome than in the idea of resistance as a social process grounded on a particular kind of alliance between the intellectual and the collective: an alliance that positions the intellectual as a participant, a facilitator, an articulator but not as omniscient teacher, as solitary genius, and, definitely, not as master of the people’s destiny.

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